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WILDLIFE DEALER SENTENCED FOR RUNNING INTERNATIONAL SMUGGLING RING

Business Trafficked in the World's Rarest Reptiles

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Keng Liang “Anson” Wong, an international wildlife dealer who spent nearly two years in a Mexican prison fighting extradition to the United States, has been sentenced in federal court in San Francisco to 71 months incarceration and a fine of \$60,000, after pleading late yesterday guilty to 40 felony charges stemming from 1998 and 1992 indictments for trafficking in some of the most rare and endangered reptile species in the world.

The charges to which Wong pleaded guilty included money laundering, conspiracy, smuggling, making false statements, and violating the Lacey Act, the federal law that prohibits trade in animals protected under federal, state, or international law.

A number of the species involved in the illegal trade, such as Komodo Monitors and Plowshare Tortoises, are on the brink of extinction and are found only in very limited, geographically isolated habitats.

Between 1996 and 1998, Wong spearheaded an international smuggling ring that illegally imported and sold more than 300 protected reptiles native to Asia and Africa. An undercover federal investigation successfully infiltrated this reptile trade, revealing that Wong illegally imported the reptiles by concealing them in express delivery packages, airline baggage, and large commercial shipments of legally declared animals.

At the time Wong was involved in these transactions, he was already wanted in the United States for similar crimes. In 1992, a federal grand jury in Florida indicted him for conspiring to smuggle endangered reptiles into the country for sale to a Florida dealer.

“Reptile trafficking is a high-profit criminal enterprise, and the United States is one of its largest markets,” said Acting Service Director Marshall Jones. “This trade robs countries of their natural heritage and takes a toll that cannot be measured in dollars.”

In July 1998, a federal grand jury in San Francisco returned a sealed indictment against Wong and three of his associates, based on evidence showing that the Malaysian businessman, who owned and operated “Sungai Rusa Wildlife” in Penang, sent 14 illegal shipments to the United States containing protected reptiles worth more than a half million dollars on the black market.

In September 1998, Wong was arrested by Mexican officials on these U.S. charges, after he arrived at the Mexico City airport to meet with an undercover agent who was posing as an American reptile dealer.

“Bringing Anson Wong to justice demonstrates the Department’s resolve to stop trafficking in endangered species,” said John Cruden, Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Environment Division at the Justice Department. “We will take whatever steps we can here and abroad to shutdown the black market in reptiles and other protected animals.”

Imprisoned in Mexico, Wong fought extradition to the United States until June 2000, when he filed papers in the Mexican courts abandoning his efforts to avoid prosecution in this country. On August 29, 2000, he was taken into custody by U.S. Marshals and flown to San Francisco to face trial. On December 13, 2000, Wong pleaded guilty to 40 federal felony crimes alleged in the San Francisco and Florida cases. As part of his plea agreement with the United States, Wong agreed that the market value of the animals he smuggled in the San Francisco case alone exceeded \$500,000.

Trade in the animals smuggled and sold by Wong is regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a global agreement that controls the importation and exportation of hundreds of imperiled animals and plants. A number of the animals he smuggled are also protected by the federal Endangered Species Act, which prohibits the importation of rare animals into the United States for commercial purposes.

The endangered species traded by Wong included two particularly rare reptiles from island nations. The Komodo Monitor (also called the Komodo Dragon), the world’s largest lizard, is native only to a relatively small area of Indonesia. The Plowshare Tortoise (also called the Madagascan Spurred Tortoise) believed by many to be the rarest tortoise species, is found only on the island of Madagascar, off the southeastern coast of Africa. Both the Komodo dragon and the plowshare tortoise can each bring up to about \$30,000 apiece on the black market.

Wong also trafficked in such rare species as the Chinese Alligator (which inhabits the lower course of the Yangtze River); the False Gaviol (a crocodile whose range is restricted to parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and southern Thailand); and the Radiated Tortoise, another species found only on Madagascar. Black market prices for these endangered reptiles range from \$5,000 to \$15,000 apiece. Other species smuggled by Wong included the Gray’s Monitor, Spider Tortoise, Burmese Star Tortoise, Indian Star Tortoise, Boelen’s Python, Timor Python, Green Tree Python, and Fly River Turtle.

In addition to Wong, seven other defendants have been convicted or pleaded guilty to federal crimes associated with the smuggling ring. James Michael Burroughs, of San Francisco, pleaded guilty in 1999 to conspiracy and two felony smuggling charges in connection with his role as a human courier of smuggled animals in airline baggage. He awaits sentencing. Arizona reptile dealer Jeffery Charles Miller pleaded guilty in February 2001 to conspiracy and four smuggling violations in connection with his role in receiving FedEx shipments of animals from Wong and selling them to buyers in the United States. Miller will be sentenced later this summer. Arizona reptile dealer Beau Lee Lewis was convicted by a federal jury in March 2001 of 16 federal felonies, including conspiracy, money laundering, smuggling and wildlife offenses, in connection with his receipt of six smuggled FedEx shipments of animals from Wong in 1997 and 1998. Former FedEx employee Robert Paluch., tried

along with Lewis, was convicted of four federal felonies, including conspiracy, smuggling and wildlife crimes, for his role in facilitating, with Lewis, the importation of FedEx shipments from Wong which contained smuggled animals. Lewis and Paluch will be sentenced on August 2. Arizona residents Brian Luebking and Nancy Mott also pleaded guilty to misdemeanor federal crimes in connection with their facilitation of the scheme and have been sentenced in the District of Arizona: both received fines and probation.. California reptile fancier Mark Biancaniello pleaded guilty to a federal felony wildlife offense for receiving smuggled animals from Wong. Biancaniello will be sentenced in San Francisco later this summer. A ninth individual, indicted with Wong and his U.S. associates, Yuk Wah "Oscar" Shiu, a Hong Kong resident who runs a wildlife import/export business in that city, is a fugitive.

The maximum penalty for money laundering is 20 years imprisonment and a \$500,000 fine; the remaining charges each carry a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

The undercover federal probe of Wong and his business associates was conducted by special agents from the Fish and Wildlife Service's Branch of Special Operations, an enforcement unit specializing in covert investigations of illegal wildlife trade, with assistance from the U.S. Customs Service, the Mexican Attorney General's Office, INTERPOL, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Canada. The case was prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of California and the Wildlife and Marine Resources Section of the Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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Note to media: B-roll film and/or color slides of reptiles smuggled in this case, including juvenile Komodo dragons and plowshare tortoises, are available by contacting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Public Affairs Office at (202) 208-5634.

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